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LETTERS FROM CONSTANTINOPLE.—III.

—, 1853.

It is really wonderful to hear the details with which one is favoured on all hands in relation to the Russians in this city. Their cunning, their foresight, their intrigues, must have been something truly Machiavellian. The Russian embassy appears to have been a centre of operations of a very singular character. Money was no object. The minister had unlimited power of action, his subordinates looked upon him as a kind of deputy majesty. They were very numerous and existed under all forms. Russia never asked who a man was; all she required was, that he should be capable of doing her dirty work. Poles, Jews, Greeks, Italians, Maltese, Franks, were employed without scruple. They lived in every corner of the town. Their duty was to wheedle, to coax, or to buy over the officials, to get influence at any price, to seem to be the great protecting power, and to force weaker nations to appeal to her. The stories told of her duplicity and crawling patience are really incredible.

That the Turks gave her plenty of occasion to use her cunning, is no defence. If the Turks were weak, and had only made slow progress in the arts of civilisation, that could in no wise justify the acts of Russian agents.

The Turkish custom-house, based on the French principle, was an admirable institution for the Muscovite to work upon. Redschid Pacha, the head of the French party, had brought with him from France several notions by no means advantageous to the country or wise in themselves. He imported passports, a censorship, and an *octroi*. He it was that organised the custom-house. Like all other Turkish institutions the custom-house is badly managed, because its clerks are ill-paid. It is almost impossible for them to live on the pittance they receive. Here then was an opening for Muscovite fraud and cunning. The Russian embassy became at once the centre of operations of bands of smugglers and contrabandists. The Russian agents bought over certain officials, and by their connivance 4,000 bales of silk were passed as 400 bales of cotton, and other such nefarious practices carried on, to the great personal advantage of certain merchants, custom-house clerks, and Russian officials. Even during the festivals of Beizam and Ramadan, they could get goods passed with ease. Their influence was such, that the importation of Protestant Bibles was almost impossible. The censorship over books in the customs was held by a low Armenian, as no Turk could tell one book from another. The consequence was, that bibles, prayer-books, etc. were stopped, while immoral French novels, and all kinds of trash, were permitted freely to pass.

The lower order of Turkish officers made money openly by fees, which they insisted on. A merchant who had just taken up his residence in Constantinople, once consigned a cargo of 447 bales of cotton to Alexandria. Before the ship could leave port, it was necessary that a *teskere*, or declaration that the description of the goods exported was correct, should be signed by some clerk. The merchant came to the custom-house, found the proper officer, and addressed him:

"Abdallah," said he, "here is my declaration. It's all right."

"Is it?" replied the Turk, taking it in his hand and looking at it upside down.

"I am quite sure of it," continued the merchant.

"Allah kerim! God is great! Think over it again, Christian. It's all wrong."

"I assure you, Abdallah, you are quite mistaken."

"I have said," replied the Turk, smoking his pipe with profound gravity.

The merchant went away in a great hurry, overhauled his cargo, obtained the written declaration of captain and mate, and rushed back. Near the bridge he met a friend. In his hurry he nearly knocked him down.

"Whither away so fast?" said the other, laughing.

The merchant briefly explained, and his friend laughed heartily.

"What is the matter?" asked the new arrival in Stamboul.

"My dear fellow, you will find, if you are not careful, that it is still all wrong. Did you give him a present?"

"No!"

"Then make haste and do it. That was all he meant. He was too much of a diplomatist to ask for it; but you give it, and try the effect."

The merchant thanked his friend, and entered the custom-house with a grave and solemn step.

"Abdallah," said he in a low tone, "you were right. There is something wrong; but I am in a great hurry, and cannot remedy it now. If you will look over it this time, why I will be more careful next."

And he dexterously slipped a small paper parcel into the man's hand.

"Mashallah!" said the Turk with profound gravity, after examining the amount with great coolness, "did I not tell you there was something wrong?"

The loss to the treasury by this system is immense; but now a searching examination promises to probe the evil and lead to a remedy. The coming of so vast a body of civilised Europeans to this place is producing its effect; and as Russian gold and Russian corruption are no longer at work—at all events so far as we know—there is some hope of a better state of things.

Passports, in a country where, out of Stamboul, scarcely a native official can read, are very provoking things. I have found them unpleasant enough in France, Italy, and Austria; but they are even worse here. The officials all pretend to be able to read them, and it is ludicrous to see a grave old Turk in a small village looking at your document upside down. On the road between this city and Adrianople, the soldiers of the guard-houses used to make a good thing out of them. They started coffee-shops in the guard-house. Under pretence of examining the passport, the traveller and servants were summoned inside. An order for coffee smoothed all difficulties, and you were allowed to proceed unmolested. Turkey, however, will now be opened up to the eyes of thousands of civilised travellers, and their suggestions will have weight with the government, which, I must say, seems decidedly to mean well, and would be far more liberal if it could. The priests of its religion, however, stand in the way of everything. The sacerdotal power is very great, and the ulemas, muftis, and others, by unfurling the flag of the Prophet, and giving money to aid the war, have gained singular popularity. This new power will be used to oppose everything enlightened, especially everything emanating from a Christian country.

But a large number of the Turks have seen through the delusions of the Koran, and only keep its outward observances because of the danger they would incur were they not to do so. There is a strange fact, which I have on the highest authority, and which explains many things. One or two influential Turks have, by the unscrupulous use of gold, been bought by Russia. Base men will be found in all countries, and though the Turk is generally strictly honourable and veracious, this may yet be believed. They, of course, pretend to work with the reformers one day, and with the conservatives the next, as Russia orders.

Turkish society is divided into the "Old Turbans," who still wear flowing garments, and are wedded to prejudice, hatred of the Christians, and every old idea of Islamism; and the "red caps and tight trousers," who wish to advance on the road of reform. In Stamboul they are pretty equally divided, though one day priestly influence gives predominance to the one, while the next, Western diplomacy raises up the other. There can be no doubt that recent events will give ultimate victory to the radical party in this country, and the radical party is that which will give equality in every form to the Christians. The right to hold property unmolested, is the one boon the Christians ask in the first instance. This will probably be conceded and carried out. It will double the wealth of Turkey. Now every Christian who makes money goes away. There is little doubt that, when the projected reforms are carried out here, Turkey will be able to defend herself, unaided by the Western powers. All she wants is a pure executive, good laws, and a wise system of finance.